

Quo vadis Belarus? And where next for EU policy?

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QUO VADIS BELARUS? AND WHERE NEXT FOR EU POLICY?

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BACKGROUND

After several years of gradual rapprochement and pragmatic engagement, EU-Belarus relations hit rock-bottom after rigged presidential election in December 2010 and the subsequent violent crackdown of opposition protests by the Belarusian regime. The ensuing 'cold war' between the West and Belarus reached its peak in February/March 2012. In response to the extension of EU sanctions, the Lukashenka regime had requested the Polish and European Union ambassadors to leave the country. All EU member states then recalled their ambassadors to Minsk. Rather than moving closer to the EU, Belarus currently appears to drift towards closer relations with the Russian Federation. Following the economic crisis which hit Belarus in 2011 - the worst since its independence in 1991 - the country's managed economy is more than ever depended on Russia for the provision of loans, subsidies on energy supply, and access to the regional market. The parliamentary elections in Belarus on 23 September 2012 are a test for the success of the EU's sanctions policy, but also for the future course of EU-Belarus relations: *Quo Vadis* Belarus, and where next for EU policy towards Belarus?

Belarus' financial crisis: Severe, but not severe enough for political change?

The economic crisis which hit Belarus in March 2011 put considerable pressure on the Lukashenka government, which tries to balance liberalising the economy to avoid bankruptcy on the one hand, and the Belarusian 'social model' which sustains the power of the government.

Following the completion of the IMF program in Belarus in March 2010, the Belarusian government immediately relaxed its monetary and fiscal policies, mainly in view of the presidential elections in December 2010. Large loans were offered to the industrial sector, and wages and pensions were increased by up to 50%. As a result inflation increased. The development was not necessarily a new phenomenon for the Belarusian economy, but the additional increase of the trade deficit and further depletion of foreign currency reserves, coupled with relatively fixed exchange rates, led to a serious monetary crisis. The financial difficulties of the Belarusian government were exacerbated by the decision of Russian state-owned gas monopoly Gazprom to increase the price of natural gas supplied to Belarus from 150 USD per 1,000 cubic metres of gas in 2009, to 169.20 USD in the first quarter of 2010 and 184.80 USD in the second quarter.

To tackle the trade deficit and the high inflation, the Belarusian government responded with some *ad hoc* measures throughout 2011 (fixed prices for select products, increased interest rates and restrictions on foreign currency exchange). In November 2011 Gazprom agreed to sell natural gas to Belarus at 60% below the price charged to other European countries. In return, Gazprom increased its ownership of Belarusian gas pipeline company Beltransgaz from 50% to 100%. Belarus received 2.5 billion USD from the sale of Beltransgaz in November 2011, a further 440 million USD loan from the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc) and

a 1 billion USD loan from the Russian Sberbank in December 2011. In June 2012, Belarus received the additional 880 million USD as the third tranche of the EurAsEc loan.¹

The inflow of fresh capital in conjunction with the *ad hoc* measures taken by the Belarusian regime helped to stabilise the economy, albeit temporarily. In April 2012 Standard & Poor's (S&P's) Ratings Services revised the sovereign credit ratings outlook for Belarus from 'negative' to 'stable'. According to S&P's, the ratings on Belarus do, however, remain constrained by political risks, high government financing needs, reliance on external funding, and the government's reluctance to introduce structural reforms to improve the country's competitiveness and growth prospects.²

The pressure on the Belarusian government to introduce more substantial structural economic reforms is indeed increasing, as is its dependence on foreign loans to repay old debt. Although the loans from Russia keep the state-managed economy afloat for now, Lukashenka still needs additional loans to finance his plans to raise the salaries of Belarusians to pre-crisis levels by the end of 2012. However, in 2011, the IMF concluded that no further loans would be issued to Belarus. Although the IMF has formally no political mandate, it is clear that its latest decisions were made in consideration of the human rights situation in the country, rather than the fulfilment of economic pre-conditions for the loan.³ The refusal of the IMF to grant a loan to Belarus is thus likely to have some impact on Lukashenka's ability to improve his ratings among the general population prior to the parliamentary elections in September 2012.

The crisis also weakened Belarusian industry and put considerable pressure on private households. Belarusian citizens suffered most

from the inflation and Belarusian enterprises forced over 600.000 employees (13% of the total workforce) to take temporary leave.⁴ Belarusian households affected by the crisis already borrow more money informally than households anywhere else in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.⁵ Consumer prices are set to rise by a further 35.5% in 2012, which is hardly a decrease from the 41% increase in prices in 2011.⁶ This explains why Lukashenka is still very reluctant to allow larger scale privatisation and foreign direct investment, which could result in labour redundancies - despite the past pressure from the IMF and the conditionality of the Russian loans, the Belarusian regime has been very successful in delaying the privatisation of key state assets.

Privatisation will, however, become increasingly harder to avoid in the future. Belarus is now part of the Single Economic Space (SES) with Russia and Kazakhstan. After Russian accession to the WTO, Belarusian exports within the SES will face harsh competition and are likely to decrease significantly. Belarusian producers will also face more competition inside Belarus due to an increase in imports of goods from the third countries via Russia and Kazakhstan via the Customs Union and the SES. The Belarusian regime might have little choice but to start serious negotiations on its WTO accession to avoid painful economic losses, which will in turn force the regime to introduce economic reforms.

Civil Society in Belarus: Potential for political change?

Prior to the 2010 presidential elections, the Belarusian authorities allowed some independent civil society activity. Between August 2008 and December 2010, very few political activists were imprisoned on political grounds, and (pro-Western) civil society

¹ BelarusDigest. Russian Subsidies Are Not Enough: Belarus Seeks a New IMF Loan, 7 February 2012: <http://belarusdigest.com>.

²The full text is available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/30/idUSWNA833920120530>.

³ Interview by the author with EEAS official, November 2011.

⁴ Forbrig, J. "Abgewirtschaftet: Europas letzter Diktator ringt um den Machterhalt. *Belarus-Analysen*, 1, 25 May 2011: p. 2.

⁵ European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Transition Report, London: EBRD, 2011: p. 50.

⁶ International Monetary Fund. World Economic Outlook: Slowing Growth, Rising Risks. September 2011: p. 38.

started to cooperate and institutionalise under the umbrella of the EU's Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (CSF).

But although the Belarusian government's pressure on independent NGOs somewhat decreased in the year proceeding the presidential election, the actual opportunities and freedom of manoeuvre of NGOs critical of the government did not change fundamentally. The Belarusian authorities took, for example, several repressive measures against the Speak the Truth Campaign, the Union of Poles in Belarus, as well as the Union of Belarusian Writers. In the course of 2010, the Speak the Truth Campaign constituted a particular problem for the regime as it gained widespread support from the population on local actions (e.g. unemployment or local infrastructure improvements). Local officials are also reported to have taken a friendly attitude to the actions of the Speak the Truth Campaign. From March 2010, the authorities began to confiscate documents, PCs and even private savings from Speak the Truth campaigners, and searched the group's offices and private apartments.

Nevertheless, the violent crackdown on the opposition protests to the 2010 presidential elections still came as a surprise to many civil society activists and the political opposition. Over 700 opposition activists were arrested, at least 57 charged and prosecuted, and 29 sentenced to prison/labour camp terms by Belarusian courts. In June 2012, at least 13 activists remain in prison on political grounds. The crackdown weakened the political opposition. Its leading representatives were either imprisoned or fled abroad. Nevertheless, several protest movements continued (or developed) throughout 2011/12, such as the 'Revolution through Social Networks' which in the summer 2011 brought thousands of silent 'clapping' protesters to the streets, or the 'Stop-Benzin' campaign which paralysed traffic through central Minsk and attracted the attention of many ordinary Belarusians. In response, the Lukashenka regime introduced new legislation further restricting the right of assembly and foreign financing of civil society organisations.

In summer 2012, young activists increasingly became the target of political repression, as well as politically 'moderate' think tanks, which had hitherto been tolerated by the regime.

The record of the EaP Civil Society Forum is also rather mixed. After several years of its existence, the actual powers and influence of the CSF remain limited, or, in the words of an NGO representative, the CSF is regarded as the 'kindergarden' by the government officials in the regional thematic platforms of the EaP.⁷ Belarusian NGOs involved in the CSF do nevertheless see some indirect benefits of the platform because it encourages coordination among Belarusian civil society.⁸

In parallel to the National Platform of the EaP Civil Society Forum, another group of Belarusian NGOs initiated the Public Advisory Council, which was aimed to foster interactions between civil society and the state, yet under the patronage of state institutions. Whereas most of the Belarusian civil society organisations involved in the EaP national platform are pro-European and strive for independence from the regime, those in favour of the Public Advisory Council seek to work with the state.⁹ These two different positions towards the state and the EU have caused a significant split in among Belarusian civil society, which appears difficult to reconcile in the near future.

Equally concerning are cleavages in the young generation of Belarusians. On the one hand, a fairly heterogeneous cluster of independent civil society groups (e.g. 'Malady Front', 'Maladaya Belarus', 'Moladz BNF') is made up of pro-Western and pro-Europe oriented young people, who use the internet, speak foreign languages and have often been abroad. It was this group of young people who initiated the 'Revolution through Social Networks' which was organised through the social network 'Vkontakte'. On the other hand,

⁷ Interview by the author with Belarusian participants of the CSF, June 2010.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Fedotova, I. and Belovsky, V. 'Civil Society: Hyperactivity with a view to future performance.' Belarusian Yearbook 2010. Vilnius, 2011: pp. 133-149.

young people are organised in the government-sponsored and pro-governmental organisation Belarusian Republic Youth Union, which offers a wide range of benefits to its members, ranging from free tickets for concerts and cinemas to employment opportunities.¹⁰

In addition, the number of Belarusian civil society organisations abroad is further expanding, they have become more difficult to network and as a result, they also often lack trust in the activities and motivations of each other.

Belarusian society: Potential for political change?

Many commentators interpreted the public protests following the 2010 presidential elections as a 'true and honest middle class that forms the basis of democracy', and a sign that Belarusian civil culture was developing from an atomised society into a civil one.¹¹ And indeed, recent polls among the Belarusian population suggest that two thirds of Belarusians believe that their country is heading in the wrong direction, and over 60 percent hold President Lukashenka responsible for the current economic crisis of the country.¹²

Moreover, Lukashenka's ratings have dropped from 53% in December 2010 to just 20.5% in September 2011. According to IISEPS's past surveys, this marks the lowest rating of Lukashenka since he took office in 1994. Yet, whereas the ratings of Lukashenka have decreased significantly, the ratings of the opposition candidates remained largely unchanged. In other words, there is certainly a growing frustration among society with the

current president, but a convincing alternative is missing, too.

In the September 2011 poll, 28% of Belarusians saw themselves in opposition to the current government, which was 10 percent more than in December 2010 (18%), though still far from the majority. The majority of Belarusians has, however, heard of the 'Revolution through Social Networks' and the silent protest campaign (70%). Only 20% stated that they disapproved of the initiatives, 37% approved the campaigns and one third was 'indifferent'. The support for civil society initiatives is therefore relatively high, compared to the low ratings of the opposition candidates, though few Belarusians indicated that they are directly involved in the protest campaigns (7%).

The picture of society-civil society relations in Belarus today is therefore rather complex. On the one hand, the number of civil society initiatives, and especially those led by the country's youth, is growing steadily, and so is their visibility to the Belarusian population at large. On the other hand, civil society in (and outside) Belarus is very heterogeneous in its goals and still lacks effective mechanisms inside the country through which it could gain greater visibility and popularity among the population.

Is a popular uprising likely to occur in Belarus any time soon? Many observers are surprised by the resilience of the Belarusian population, especially since the current economic crisis drastically reduced the average living standard; even of those who were relatively well off before the economic crisis. The monthly average wage in Belarus currently ranges between 135-200 USD, with prizes for goods as high as in the EU27 (or higher).¹³

Explanations range from the 'ethos of resilience' among the Belarusian population, to its 'self-sufficiency' throughout history, or the non-existence of a political public sphere

¹⁰ Kapustina, O. and Bosse, G. 'Civil Society and young people in Belarus: A force for political change or 'silent majority'? Options for EU Polic.' Policy Brief for the Roundtable Conference: Democracy promotion East and South after the Arab Spring, TEPSA/Maastricht University/IEP, Brussels, 1/2 December 2011: p. 5.

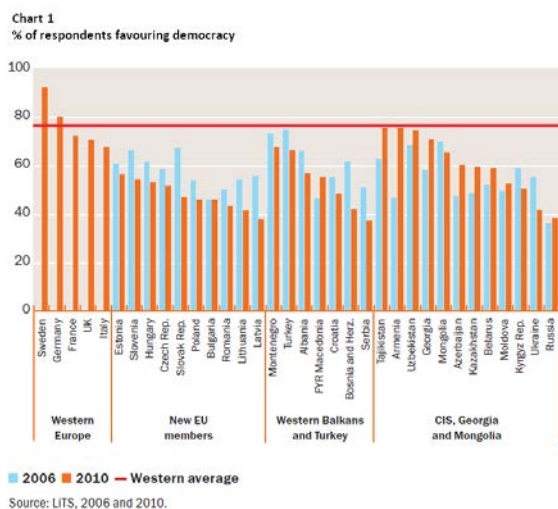
¹¹ Silitski, V. 'Requiem for a dialogue.' Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, 13 January 2011: p. 2.

¹² Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, September 2011: <http://www.iiseeps.org>.

¹³ With the exception of 'essential' products such as milk or bread, or public transport costs, which are regulated by the state and therefore remain rather cheap.

and public discussions.¹⁴ A less intangible explanation is that an increasingly large number of young and highly educated Belarusians are leaving Belarus. As a result, they are less likely to take part in opposition protests inside Belarus for a lack of prospects or political freedoms. According to estimates, the number of new and officially registered Belarusian workers in Kiev and Moscow has increased by a third of a million since 1 January 2011, and several EU programs finance scholarships at European universities for young Belarusians, many of whom often do not return to Belarus.¹⁵

On the other hand, the level of support for democracy among the Belarusian population is in fact currently higher than in Moldova and Ukraine, and higher than in all 'new' EU member states (Chart 1).¹⁶ Therefore, and as the popular uprisings in the Arab world in 2011/12 have demonstrated, the myth of a 'passive people' or 'lack of civil society' in a country may at times be proven wrong, and should also not be assumed to be the case *per se* for Belarus.



THE EU'S POLICY TOWARDS BELARUS: 'MORE CRITICAL THAN ENGAGEMENT'?

Since Lukashenka became the president of Belarus in 1994, the EU's policy towards Belarus moved from a policy of isolation (from 1996 onwards) to a policy of 'critical engagement' from 2008.¹⁷ EU officials describe the response of the Union to the violent crackdown of the opposition after the 2010 presidential election as a move from 'more engagement than critical' to 'more critical than engagement'.¹⁸ EU policy towards Belarus after the election in 2010 is essentially based on two key pillars: (i) more targeted sanctions and (ii) more support for civil society. What are the pros and cons of this policy *in practice* and is it likely to affect political developments in Belarus?

1. Restrictive measures: Targeted sanctions or political prisoners' game?

In response to the violations of human rights by the Belarusian regime in the aftermath of the 2010 presidential elections, the EU reactivated and broadened restrictive measures against Belarus. Between January 2011 and June 2012, the EU designated almost 250 individuals to a visa-ban and assets freeze, imposed an arms embargo and an assets freeze on 32 Belarusian companies. In its initial Decision of 31 January 2011, the Council targeted individuals responsible 'for the violations of international electoral standards' and the 'crackdown on civil society and democratic opposition'. The range of individuals targeted by sanctions was significantly broadened one year later (January 2012) to include those responsible for 'serious violations of human rights or the repression of civil society and democratic opposition in Belarus' and 'persons or entities benefiting from or supporting the Lukashenka

¹⁴ Zeit Online 'Lukaschenkos Regime ist in Gefahr.' Interview with Walerij Karbalewitsch, 11 November 2011, available from: <http://www.zeit.de>.

¹⁵ Pikulik, A. 'Is the economic crisis a threat to the Lukashenko regime?' BISS BLITZ, Belarusian Institute for Strategic Affairs, 1 November 2011.

¹⁶ European Bank for Reconstruction and Development 'Transition Report 2011.' London: EBRD: p. 62.

¹⁷ For a discussion see: Bosse, G. 'A Partnership with Dictatorship: Explaining the Paradigm Shift in European Union Policy towards Belarus.' *Journal of Common Market Studies* 50, 3 (2012): pp. 367-384.

¹⁸ Interviews by the author with EU officials in November/December 2011, Brussels.

regime'.¹⁹ The vast majority of targeted individuals are judges and prosecutors, as well as key personnel of the KGB and ministries.

The use and impact of the sanctions is contested. On the one hand, there is a general consensus that targeted 'smart' sanctions are more effective and feasible than imposing a trade embargo.²⁰ First, full-blown trade sanctions are likely to negatively affect the Belarusian population by targeting large state-owned enterprises which would in turn result in large-scale redundancies. Second, the regime can survive a trade embargo (if not even consolidate) by diverting trade away from the EU towards the Single Economic Space with Russia and Kazakhstan. And third, EU member states are not likely to agree on an effective trade embargo because of vested economic interests (e.g. the Baltic states' interest in joint ventures with/ investments in Belarusian companies). Moreover, senior EU officials appear to see smart sanctions as an effective means to signal to the public that the EU 'is doing something' in response to the violation of human rights, and is seen to be on 'the right side of history', in particular in the context of the recent popular uprisings against the autocratic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa.²¹

On the other hand, 'smart sanctions' raise a number of questions, especially considering that they have been dominating the EU's policy towards Belarus over the past year.

First, and crucially, the EU has not clearly defined the goal of the sanctions. Currently, the main reason for the sanctions against individuals (the prosecution and imprisonment of political opponents) is equated with the goal of the sanctions (the release of all political prisoners). The EU has therefore moved away from its long-term

political demands pertaining to broader democratic reforms in Belarus. Instead, the EU is engaging once again in Lukashenka's geopolitical game over political prisoners.²² By linking enhanced relations with the EU to the release of political prisoners, the Belarusian regime escapes the conditionality of democratic reform. It is also far from certain that the game will pay off for the EU: In September 2011 the regime agreed to release a number of political prisoners, yet most likely not because of EU sanctions, but following the visit of Bulgarian Foreign Minister Nickolay Mladenov, who negotiated the release.

Second, the provision that smart sanctions can be invoked against any individual supporting the Lukashenka regime is very general and exposes the EU to criticism regarding a possible arbitrary application. In Belarus, thousands of individuals work for the state either directly or indirectly, and it is therefore exceptionally difficult to distinguish between supporters/non-supporters of the regime. The EU should thus also be very clear on the grounds upon which it places leading businessmen (and their companies) on the black-list, and justify why it views some more 'supportive' of the regime than others. Third, EU member states and EU institutions should not to breach the sanctions regime. Several Belarusian officials were granted entry into EU member states, despite being subject to the visa ban.²³ In addition, the European Commission itself may breach the provisions of the arms embargo towards Belarus by concluding contracts for the supply of night vision equipment for a new border management project.²⁴ Such equipment can be used for internal repression and falls under the arms embargo.²⁵

¹⁹ Council Decision 2010/639/CFSP of 25 October 2010 concerning restrictive measures against Belarus, OJ L 280, 26 October 2010, pp. 2-3.

²⁰ For a different point of view see: Marin, A. 'Sociological study on the composition of the Belarusian society.' Study for the Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union, European Parliament, May 2012.

²¹ Interviews by the author with EU officials in November/December 2011, Brussels.

²² For a discussion see: Plaschinsky, G. 'Political Prisoners in Belarus: How to Break the Vicious Circle.' Belarus Digest, 20 February 2012.

²³ Charles, M. 'The EU and Belarus: Sanctions? What Sanctions?' EUobserver.com, 27 January 2012, available at: <http://euobserver.com/7/115040>.

²⁴ Contract forecast notice, Supplies: 'Strengthening surveillance capacity on the "green" and "blue" border between the Republic of Belarus and Ukraine', OJ/S S45, 6 March 2012, 72505-2012.

²⁵ Articles 1a/b, Council Regulation 588/2011 of 20 June 2011, and Annex III: 'List of equipment which might be used for internal repression', point 7: p. 6.

2. Support for civil society: Democracy vs. Modernisation?

The EU was very quick to condemn the Belarusian for the violation of international electoral standards and human rights after the presidential elections in 2010. In its review of the ENP of May 2012, the Commission concludes that the EU had 'strengthened its engagement with civil society, the political opposition and the public at large'. It redirected 'major parts' of its assistance for Belarus to civil society which led to a 'significant increase' of its support for civil society.²⁶ Yet, although the new emphasis on civil society by the EU was well-received by the political opposition in Belarus, doubts remain over the implementation of the new support for civil society in 2012/13 *in practice*.

First, funds for the two principal instruments through which the EU supports civil society in Belarus in fact decrease from 2011 to 2012. The support for non-state actors (NSAs) via the 'Non-State Actors and Local Authorities in Development Program' (which includes funds from the Civil Society Facility) was reduced by more than half from €3.9 million in 2011 to just €2 million for 2012 *and* 2013.²⁷ The funds available for civil society via the Country-Based Support Scheme of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) will double from €0.5 million in 2011 to €1.1 million in 2012.²⁸ An additional €6 million is made available for students' mobility and youth language courses in 2011-2013.²⁹ In total, however, funding for NSAs and via the EIDHR for civil society will decrease from an average of €6.4 million in 2011 to €4.1 million in 2012.

Second, the National Indicative Programme (NIP) for Belarus for 2012/13 clearly places an emphasis on capacity-building of public authorities rather than the capacity-building of civil society. The Country Strategy Paper for Belarus (2007-13) still foresaw the 'support for the development of democracy' and 'social and economic development' and placed a special emphasis on increased capacities of civil society and professional organisations.³⁰ The NIP 2012/13, however, clearly prioritises modernisation and good governance, and in particular improving the capacity of public institutions to manage privatisation and investment processes, and to introduce reforms to establish and functioning market economy.³¹ Just one priority focuses on developing more effective institutions guaranteeing democracy and respect for human rights, though it appears that the emphasis of EU technical assistance in 2012 is on the implementation of sector programmes such as for energy, transport or the environment.³²

Third, the EU has, in practice, ruled out supporting Belarusian civil society *at large*. Speaking at the European Parliament in January 2012, the Head of the EU's delegation in Minsk, Maira Mora, made it clear that her office had no intention of adopting a broader 'sector approach' to engage with Belarusian civil society.³³ The rather narrow definition of civil society by the EU will most likely further decrease the levels of interest in and awareness of the EU among ordinary Belarusians. According to the latest opinion polls, the support for Russia is now 10% higher than support for the EU.³⁴ In the past decade, levels of support for integration with the EU always exceeded support for integration with Russia. The EU's latest initiatives for civil

²⁶ For example: Joint Staff Working Document 'Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2011.' Regional Report: Eastern Partnership, 15 May 2012: SWD(2012) 112 final: p. 3.

²⁷ Allocations of funding stated in the National Indicative Programme for Belarus (NIP) 2012-13 (p. 23) are indicative, actual allocations and budget lines appear in the respective project calls: For NSA&LA Actions in Belarus see the calls: EuropeAid/131655/L/ACT/BY (2011) and EuropeAid/132809/L/ACT/BY (2012-13).

²⁸ EIDHR call: EuropeAid/130756/L/ACT/BY (2010-11).

²⁹ NIP 2012-13, p. 23.

³⁰ ENPI, Belarus, Country Strategy Paper 2007-2013.

³¹ NIP 2012-13, pp. 15-16.

³² NIP 2012-13, p. 13; Contract forecast notice, Services: 'Capacity development facility to support the implementation of sector programmes under the ENPI annual action programmes for Belarus', OJ/S S106, 6 June 2012, 175759-2012.

³³ Meeting of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament, 12 January 2012, available at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ep-live/EN/committees>.

³⁴ Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, March 2012: <http://www.iiseps.org>.

society, such as the European Endowment for Democracy, or the European Dialogue on Modernization with Belarusian Society seem to point in the same direction – they almost exclusively involve leading figures of the political opposition and the larger (and often pro-European) Belarusian think tanks closely networked with EU institutions in Brussels.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Targeted sanctions require clear criteria:*

As long as Belarusian authorities, prosecutors, judges and security forces continue to violate international electoral standards and participate in the crackdown on civil society and democratic opposition, the EU should continue to place the involved individuals on its visa-black list. Sanctions should only be applied to persons supporting the Lukashenka regime more generally, if the EU establishes clear criteria for which actions/situations count as support and which do not. Placing entrepreneurs on the visa-black list simply because they feature on the ranking of the 200 most successful Belarusian businessmen, should not be the way forward and would lead to accusations of an arbitrary application of EU sanctions.³⁵ In turn, the authority of the EU's sanctions could be undermined, and the EU might in fact lose several of its potential 'allies' in the quest to push Lukashenka to introduce liberal market reforms.³⁶

2. *Targeted sanctions should not be circumvented:*

It is of course important that the EU continues to ensure that it speaks 'with one voice' on Belarus. However, compared to EU policy towards other authoritarian regimes, such as Libya or Iran for example, its policy towards Belarus has by and large been fairly unified over the past decades. What should (and could) be avoided, however, are instances in which member states and EU

institutions attempt to circumvent their own sanctions regime, such as purchasing dual-use equipment for border assistance projects.

3. *More projects with civil society at large:*

Several of the EU's recently funded projects, for example the 'Belarus-EU Task Force', are indeed designed to engage with a broader range of civil society groups in Belarus (e.g. higher education, regional development, and SME).³⁷ Besides supporting the political opposition/ independent political elites in Belarus, the EU should also strategically target and develop the capacity civil society in other sectors over a sustained period of time (new program/budget line). The Civil Society Facility could be used for that purpose in the current financial term (until 2013), but then it should function as a top-up to existing programs with a clear definition of the target group, rather than a means to disguise the reduction of funding in existing programs, as is the case with the Non-State Actors support in 2012/13. Only 'real' projects with substance and a broader reach increase the visibility of the EU among Belarusians, not projects which solely aim at increasing EU visibility.

4. *Making 'critical engagement' work:* The EU's engagement with Belarus' authorities is certainly controversial. There is no automatic guarantee that it leads to a socialisation of officials towards democracy, or that economic modernisation will lead to political reforms. However, if the EU does place a greater emphasis on capacity-building of Belarus' public administration in 2012/13, efforts should be made to implement meaningful assistance projects that offer targeted and hands-on training to Belarusian officials by practitioners with long-term experience in the field and with a high level of knowledge of the country. At the same time, the projects should take into account the new EU Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy, and use all available diplomatic/strategic windows of opportunity to voice concerns

³⁵ Ibid.: Belarusians believe that the authorities (34.9%) and law enforcement bodies (11.3%) are violating human rights in Belarus. Businessmen were not mentioned in response to the open question of who was violating human rights in Belarus the most.

³⁶ For a different point of view see: Korosteleva, J. 'Impact of targeted sanctions on Belarus.' Study for the Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union, European Parliament, May 2012.

³⁷ For additional details on the project see: <http://democraticbelarus.eu/news/clearing-house-project>.

over and negotiate steps towards democratic reform in Belarus.³⁸

5. **No unnecessary large-scale loans:** In the short term, the Belarusian economy is likely to stabilise and further EU economic sanctions or the withdrawal of its (limited) ENPI financial assistance from Belarus will have no significant effect on the Belarusian economy, in particular taking into account the large increase in trade turnover between the EU and Belarus in 2011/12. The granting of a new IMF loan, for example, would have allowed Lukashenka to take more costly measures to improve his popularity ratings among the Belarusian population prior to the elections in September 2012.

6. **A clear strategy for Belarus:** It is important to remember that the impact of EU policy in Belarus is likely to remain rather limited, taking into account the geopolitics and geo-economics of Russia's relations with the country (and with the EU), and the nature of the Belarusian regime. Nevertheless, the EU could still be more specific about the goals of its policy towards Belarus. Is the goal of the sanctions to 'punish' particular individuals for human rights violations, to 'annoy Lukashenka' or simply to signal that the EU 'is doing something' about autocratic regimes in its neighbourhood?³⁹ And what is the goal of the policy in the longer term: Push Lukashenka to introduce reforms or regime change? There is no consensus among EU officials on the answers to questions which hinge upon fundamental discussions on whether political change in autocratic countries can occur from 'within' or from 'outside', and the role that civil society can or should play in the process. The EU cannot solve this puzzle, but a clear strategy or vision for EU-Belarus relations could build on such a discussion.

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³⁸ The EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (Council of the EU, 25 June 2012: 11855/12) foresees the systematic integration of human rights and democracy into 'all aspects of the internal and external policies of the European Union' (p.1).

³⁹ The goals were articulated by EU officials in interviews with the author in November/December 2011, Brussels.